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Is The Russian Bear Back in Georgia?

One American's View

Ernest Sipes

When I arrived in Tbilisi one week ago, I came with an open mind about the movement of Russian troops into South Ossetia and Abkhazia. I watched with interest CNN and other news channels in the United States before arriving. Some reporters made the case that Russia was simply protecting the citizens in those provinces of Georgia from being persecuted and even killed by the Georgian army and militia groups. Like many other Americans I wanted to believe that Russia had changed since its days as the USSR. At fifty years of age I had lived through Perestroika and Glasnost. I thought that never again would the world suffer the Russian Bear again as it had from the 1950s into the 1990s.

Growing up in the United States in the 1960s I was very much aware that Russia was my country's adversary. America had fought a proxy war with the Soviet Union for most of my childhood. Looking back, I remember large maps on schoolroom walls where Soviet territory was colored red. And there was a lot of red on those maps. I also remember as a seven- year-old a school drill where we were timed by the teacher on how fast we could hide under our desks in case of a Russian nuclear attack. My first grade teacher told us that because we lived in Alaska, we would be the first to be attacked. On television in the 1970s, grainy images of Soviet "Bear" bombers patrolling off the coast of Alaska would sometimes be shown on the news.

But that was all in the past, I thought. Russia now elected a president and the people could vote for their leaders. Democratic reforms have been heralded in the newspapers since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. With free elections, how could another Stalin, Khrushchev or Brezhnev control Russia and without consequence attack other nations like it had Hungary in 1956 and Afghanistan in the 1980s? It just could not happen again. As an American I wanted to see the best in Russia.

But then I woke on August 9th and turned on the television. Over the next few days I had a peculiar sense of deja vu. Unbelievably, there were pictures

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appearing on screen of Russian tanks smashing cars in Georgia. Another image that haunted me was one of a man weeping while holding a dead relative in a courtyard. It all seemed very familiar.

I came to Georgia for the first time to see if it was true. Was the old Russian Bear back? Could Russia have slipped into the past that we all almost desperately wanted to forget?

When I arrived in Tbilisi on Wednesday, I knew no one in Georgia. After a little haggling with a taxi driver I found a cheap hotel in Varketili. The owners were a kind Georgian couple and I had many discussions with them and my neighbors about the Russian crisis. Over the past week I made a genuine attempt to understand the Russian view. But it was all very confusing for me in Tbilisi. The Georgians I met were stressed, and who could blame them? The Russians were only twenty miles from the capital and there was no shortage of rumors around the town. But were the men at the roadblocks actually peacekeepers as they said on CNN?

The answer had to lie in the areas of Russian occupation near Gori, but the problem was getting there. Without being able to afford to buy a car, I couldn't drive to Gori and no one else was willing to take me. It was impossible, I was told. The Russians would rob all Georgians at the roadblocks and were said to

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shoot cars at random. I made many phone calls attempting to secure a ride north of Tbilisi but it was impossible for the first three days.

On Thursday night I attended a political rally in a churchyard near the central city. It was a beautiful spectacle, with dozens of children waving Georgian flags while impassioned women sang patriotic songs of Georgian independence. The scene was very stirring, but surely it could not be that simple, as I was taught that political debate is never one-sided.

Finally, on Friday evening a man named Bakhva came to my hotel and said he would drive me to Gori the next day as the Russians had agreed to withdraw from the city. We left at mid-morning and upon leaving Tbilisi you could see no signs of war. Along the road, signs announced the towns of Dzegri and Katiskheri but soon Georgian army vehicles passed us at high speed. Near Kaspi the Georgian road blocks began. As we approached the snarl of cars, I could hear arguments between citizens and the Military Police. Our car was moved away from the line for questioning. Bakhva explained that I was a journalist, so the young soldier waved us by the roadblock.

This scene was repeated four times until we neared Krakhvrel, where a armored personnel carrier sat halfway off of the road. More abandoned trucks appeared a short distance ahead. Wrecked and riddled with machine gun holes, they were barely pushed off the asphalt. Near one truck, several circular dark blood stains, each with swarms of flies lining the edge, pockmarked the asphalt. Men died here a few days before, and it is the first place I caught the familiar sour-sweet smell of human blood. Because of the heat and smell I felt sick to my stomach.

After being waved past two more road blocks we reached Gori. Convoys of Georgian army vehicles lined the road, waiting to move into position as the Russian troops left. Bahkva and I drove slowly through an eerily quiet Gori as a kaleidoscope of images appeared before us.

Burnt apartment buildings, scarred with machine gun fire with drapes billowing out of broken windows. A dead dog, cut in half, lay in the street. A line of Gori residents waiting at a store window for bread that has run out. An old woman with a scarf on her head is walking in circles in a rubble-filled side street.

We stopped the car and walked into an empty courtyard faced by two ruined apartment buildings. Along the edge of one structure, a new city bus, pockmarked with bullet holes, creaked in the late afternoon breeze. When the wind blows towards the bus I can smell death again. Somewhere a body lies in the rubble, rotting in the heat.

We drove away and circled through the town square. As we passed a street corner, a small group of men with a small table set with bread, cheese and white wine celebrated the pull-out of the Russians. They called to us to drink a toast. "Where are you from?" one asks as I stand at the table. From America, I respond. "Oh America! You are a friend of Georgia!" yells a tall man with a brown, wrinkled face. They will not let me leave until I drink a toast to Georgia. With plastic glasses we all toast, first to Georgia, then America. "The Russians, they are pigs," says one man as he spits on the ground. I also spit on the ground and then lift my glass and toast to Gori.

After a short talk Bahkva and I decide to try and pass the Russian roadblock and reach Tskhinvali. There are rumors the Russians have committed atrocities in the smaller Georgian villages near there. Before we go one mile towards Tskhinvali another Georgian roadblock stops us. I showed the soldier my cameras and he lets us pass.

As Bahkva drives down a tree-lined road, three cars are stopped in the middle of the street but no Georgian soldiers are present. About 200 meters ahead green-clad soldiers behind a cement barricade are roughly pulling people from a small mini van. They are Russian soldiers, says Bahkva. He leans forward and touches a small icon and then crosses himself three times. To the left of the barricade is a brown tent. A white, blue and red flag waves to the left of the Russian position.

I exited our vehicle to speak with the three men standing by the cars. A tall, thin man wearing a flak vest tells me he is with Sky News and it is impossible to pass the Russian roadblock a short distance ahead. I ask Bahkva if he will drive past the road block but he says nothing. I offer him more money but he says it is too dangerous because he is Georgian. We get back in the car and begin driving back towards Tbilisi.

On Sunday a train carrying fuel exploded a short distance out of Gori. Georgian authorities stated a land mine set by the departing Russian forces detonated when the train passed over the tracks. Why had the Russians set the mine on the tracks? Because they are the Russian Bear. And the Bear is in Georgia.

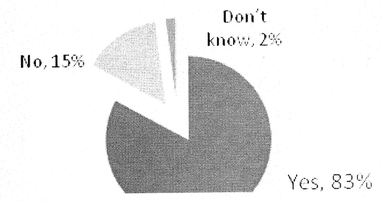
SOCIETY TODAY – SURVEY RESULTS

ACT Marketing Research & Consulting

Tbilisians credit Russia with separation

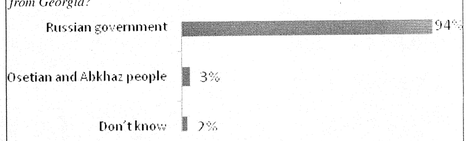
Senior officials of Russia and leaders of the Georgian separatist regions claim that due to recent events taking place in South Ossetia, Ossetian and Abkhazian people can no longer live together with Georgians. ACT explored what do Tbilisians think and who is mostly concerned about separation.

Figure 1. Considering the recent events, is it possible for Georgian people to live alongside Abkhazian and Ossetian ethnicities in separatist regions?



As the survey shows, despite provocations, offensive statements and aggressive actions from Ossetian and Abkhazian people, the vast majority of Tbilisians still believe that it is absolutely possible for Georgians to live alongside with the ethnic people in Abkhazian and South Ossetian regions. Moreover, it seems that Tbilisi residents are conscious of the role of Russia in the separation of the two regions. The restoration of the Georgian territories, in Tbilisians, opinion is hindered mainly due to the interests of the Russian government (94%).

Figure 2. Who is mostly interested in separating Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia?

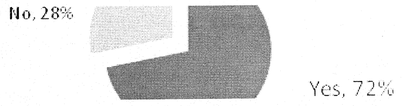


Based on a representative sample of 400 Tbilisi residents aged 18+, four hundred people 18 years-old and older were researched in August of 2008. The statistical error of the indicators does not excede 5%.

Are Tbilisians helping IDPs?

According to the Georgian government, up to 120,000 individuals have been driven out by force from Tskhinvali, Shida Kartli regions and the Kodori Gorge due to the recent Russian military invasion. The majority of refugees are concentrated in Tbilisi and many countries have sent or plan to send humanitarian aid to them. The survey showed the level of involvement of local volunteers in helping the refugees.

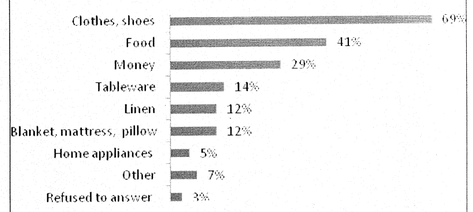
Figure 1. Did you or your family members help refugees from the conflict zone?



Despite the tremendous humanitarian help forwarded to Georgian IDPs from numerous western countries, the vast majority of families living in Tbilisi (72%) showed great empathy and assisted refugees from conflict zone in South Ossetia.

The ways of contribution varied from primary consumption goods to electrical home appliances; the majority of our community helped refugees by way of clothes and shoes, two out of five (41%) delivered food and approximately one third (29%) provided financial aid. The latter includes money transfers from bank accounts and phones.

Figure 2. In what ways did you help refugees?



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